

Sheep numbers are so few nowadays that unloading at the scales is a private affair. One San Angelo terminal, Mid-West Feed Yards, once had lines of a dozen trucks waiting to back into the loading chute. Those of us waiting to weigh our lambs were willing to help other shippers unload to reduce the lost time and shrink of our delicate product.

Volume at the auction barn remains high from the ewes coming from the north to go to Mexican buyers. Bound to be times the auction docks are congested, as few truckers today know how to handle sheep. I am lucky in knowing two men who can load lambs on their trucks as fast as we can count into the loading pen. Before we start gathering or taking bids on the lambs, I contact those two fellows to know the days they are free. Makes a tremendous difference in weight loss to have a good truck driver.

Range conditions and condition of the sheep plus the weather on shipping day are big factors. Every work has an advantage and a disadvantage. July is a bad bet in the shortgrass country, especially if the humidity is high. Sheep, men and horses pant breathing wet, hot air. Knock the spook ("spook" might be too flavorful, so try "scare") out of a string of lambs on a moist, warm morning,

and you may find yourself watching the shadows change from morning to overhead sun to mid-afternoon. Five and one-half hours is the record length for helping load a triple-deck truck with a pot. However, the lambs were sick and the trucker was a goat hauler from Central Texas.

The challenge this July was a race to beat the prickly pear apples ripening. Old ewes were already eating pads and green apples while standing in good sheep feed. First move was a mistake. We penned the adult addicts to remove their influence on the lambs. I rushed over to Mertzon to buy 20 sacks of chicken mash to feed the old sisters in the pen. Chicken mash is all a pear eater call eat after their lips become so swollen and filled with thorns. In the rush, I just asked for chicken feed. The warehouseman, disturbed by my urgency, pitched the feed on the pickup in a big rush. I left without signing the ticket.

At the ranch, I backed into the barn. Rolled two 50-pound bags to the feed pen to see if the pellets were soft enough for the ewes to swallow. Stood awhile and watched them foraging the feed around, holding their heads up to allow for the cubes to pass their swollen tongues.

Next morning, we had to leave early. One of the men opened two more sacks of feed for the hospital bunch. He came back into the horse lot shaking his head, saying, "I

never saw a sheep imitating a rooster. Never in my whole life." After I had pitched my saddle on, I walked over to the same spot where I had stood the night before. Instead of throwing their heads up to swallow, the goofy old sisters were throwing their heads up and straining the neck muscles like they wanted to crow.

By the time we penned the first bunch of sheep, the feed pen was back to normal, if you can call bobbing their heads and lifting their heads up to swallow the feed "normal". But the next morning at the first glimmer of daylight in the east, the same neck-stretching act happened except that up close a gurgling sound was audible from them straining so much.

The only cowboy in the country to ever call me "Mr.Noelke" hollered from the barn: "Mr. Noelke, that's not chicken mash. Says on the sack it's 'Game Cock Conditioner.' Must mean it's for fighting roosters, not laying eggs." After he found the trouble, I remembered hearing that the old boy raising fighting chickens on the river had sold out. I didn't tell the warehouseman at the wool house why I wanted chicken feed. He must have thought I'd bought all those Spring Creek fighting roosters.

Took 48 hours to stabilize the feed pen. We diluted the rooster feed with shelled corn. I didn't dare try to

work the ewes as long as they scattered in all directions every time we walked in the pen. I am not going to say one of the stronger ones didn't try to jump up on the fence, but several head bedded in the tall cow toughs in the pen.

Once the lambs were weaned the trucker came on time and loaded the lambs as easy as racking a table of billiard balls. The work is over. The ewes are on feed. Wish now I'd fed the game cock conditioner straight, just to add a little life on those determined to die pear-eaters.